

A RARE FORM OF MAORI *TUERE* CANOE PROW FROM OPITO, COROMANDEL PENINSULA

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Abstract. The discovery in a swamp at Opito, Coromandel Peninsula, of a rare *tuere* type of Maori war canoe prow, its removal from New Zealand, sale in Europe to an unknown purchaser, and an unsuccessful enquiry by Interpol, are recorded. The prow is described and compared to others similar in museums in London, Berlin, Florence and Philadelphia and those recorded by Cook and D'Urville. This reveals the wide variation in construction of this type of prow and its late 18th century geographic range from Northland to Hauraki, the Bay of Plenty and the East Coast, with later extensions into Rotorua and the Waikato.

KEYWORDS: Canoe prow; Maori art; wood carving.

CANOE PROW OFFERED TO AUCKLAND MUSEUM

In June 1988, Auckland Museum was approached by an intermediary to see if it would be interested to purchase a Maori canoe prow that was being offered for sale by a private individual in the Netherlands. The intermediary lived in Auckland but travelled to the Netherlands frequently on business.

The intermediary supplied two colour photographs of the prow which he said had come from a swamp on the Coromandel Peninsula. The size was said to be 700-800 mm high and *ca* 1 m long, but it was now broken into four pieces. He was not able to supply any further information on its origin or place of discovery. He did not know how long it had been out of New Zealand but gave the impression that it had been overseas for a long time. He was not able to give any idea as to what price his contact expected to obtain for the prow.

On the basis of this, Auckland Museum made a preliminary offer for the prow via the intermediary, on 21 June 1988, just before he left for a trip to the Netherlands. A reply was received from the intermediary dated 16 October 1988 from Amsterdam, informing the museum that the owner would not accept anything less than \$10,000 (US). The intermediary commented that; "This appeared too expensive as it is in several pieces and requires extensive restoration".

Just recently, it has also come to notice that this prow was being offered for sale via another intermediary from San Francisco in 1987. This is how the matter remained until the next episode described below.

INQUIRY ABOUT A CANOE PROW FROM COROMANDEL

In late June 1994, Auckland Museum received a verbal enquiry from Mrs Patricia MacDonald of Auckland, representing Ngati Hei, regarding the present whereabouts of a Maori canoe prow that had been found within Ngati Hei territory at Opito on the Coromandel Peninsula. It was apparently widely known in the area and among Ngati Hei that this prow had been found. The finder, a local farmer who has since left the district, found the prow in a swamp on

his property sometime in the 1970s.

More recently, Peter Johnston (pers. comm. 22 November 1995), then Chairman of Ngati Hei Trust, was able to provide details on the find site:

I can say with authority that the carved canoe prow was found on the ... property before 1983 and probably in a swamp area that has subsequently been drained and plowed and put into grass. This area is immediately below and west of a ridge that contains old kumara pits, which are designated in the Historic Places Register as Site T10/668. Also to the south and west of this site lies a small pa hidden in the pines of what is now part of the Ramarama Forest Block administered by Ernslaw One. This pa has a designation T10/684 on the Register and was partially bulldozed by forest workers in 1984. However, this pa, I believe, was a place of retreat for the remnants of Ngati Hei during the incursive raids to this district of Ngapuhi in the years 1818–1838. I believe, this redoubt was probably never discovered due to its isolation. This prow was seen at the time of recovery by Ben Davis, my cousin, and a workmate, both of whom were involved in post and telegraph work in the area at the time. It is not possible to establish exactly when this was, but as I conveyed to you, I believe it was mid-1970s.

Mr Johnston went on to explain that many artefacts had been found on this property over the years, because of its proximity to the Tahanga adze quarry, and the presence of “at least four known pa maori, innumerable archaeological sites, various urupa, and sites of antiquity”.

Soon after Mrs MacDonald's enquiry, a photograph of this find (Fig. 1) was supplied to Auckland Museum by Brenda Sewell, an Auckland archaeologist who had seen and photographed the prow at the farmer's home at Opito sometime in the period of Christmas 1978 to January 1979. In this photograph the prow appears to be still intact, despite some obviously weak areas. Brenda Sewell had the impression that the prow had been discovered quite recently. Close comparison of the photographs confirmed that this is the same prow as that offered to Auckland Museum in 1988 from the Netherlands.

Discreet enquiries were made by several people in the district but they were unable to establish exactly when the prow was discovered, when it was taken out of the country, or by whom.

PRESENT LOCATION OF THE PROW

On 21 July 1994, in response to my further enquiry, the intermediary informed me that the prow had been sold several years ago by his contact in the Netherlands to an artefact dealer in Paris. Its present whereabouts were unknown. Suspecting that the prow may have been exported illegally from New Zealand, a report was prepared for the Department of Internal Affairs. As a result of this report, Interpol was alerted and some enquiries were made in New Zealand and Europe. These enquiries were inconclusive and the present location of the prow remains unknown. Despite this uncertainty, it was felt that in view of its rarity and cultural importance for Ngati Hei, this prow should be reported in the ethnographic literature.

DESCRIPTION OF THE OPITO PROW

According to the intermediary, the Opito prow is *ca* 700–800 mm high and *ca* 1 m long but it is now broken into at least four pieces. Further description can only be gleaned from the available photographs which show several major cracks following contorted timber grain, some

For cultural reasons, these images have been removed.
Please contact Auckland Museum for more information.

Figs 1-3. *Tuere* prows. 1. Opito. Photo: Brenda Sewell. 2. British Museum 1900.7-21.1. Photo: British Museum. 3. Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin VI 165. Photo: D.R. Simmons.

minor areas of missing timber and parts of the surface deeply eroded and apparently waterworn. While allowing for the ageing effect that these features impart to the carving, it is still virtually certain that the prow was carved with stone tools, probably in the 18th century or even earlier.

The composition consists of three long sinuous *manaia* figures separated by openwork carving similar to *matakupenga* design but forming a double spiral between the first and second *manaia*. The head of the first *manaia* is rendered as a typical rounded head and crescent-shaped jaw but the heads of the second and third *manaia* are stylised to a simple curl. Weathering has obscured much of the surface patterning but the first and second *manaia* are mostly covered by a complex pattern of plain rolling spirals, changing at the lower end of the first *manaia* to a repeated linear pattern of angular zig-zags or alternating straight *unaunahi*. The same angular pattern occurs on the *matakupenga* at the lower front of the prow, forming a small compassrose design at the extreme front. Much of the *matakupenga* may have been decorated with *unaunahi* surface patterning. The border around the perimeter of the carving has mostly been left plain. At the lower edge, the border is considerably thicker and is pierced by two large lashing holes.

Presumably it is carved on both sides but only the true right side is seen in the available photographs.

ETHNOGRAPHIC IMPORTANCE OF THIS PROW

This form of prow, called a *tuere*, is much rarer than the standard Maori war canoe type of prow, usually called a *pitau*. Prows of the *tuere* type, sometimes called a trapezoid prow or a northern prow in the ethnological literature, have been documented mainly from North Auckland, Waikato, Coromandel, Tolaga Bay and the Bay of Plenty.

Actual examples of early *tuere* central panels directly comparable to the Opito prow are very rare in museum collections, being restricted to one in each of the British Museum in London, the Berlin-Dahlem Museum für Völkerkunde and the Florence Museo Nazionale di Antropologia e Etnologia di Firenze. All of these (Figs 2-4) consist only of the openwork carved central panel. Some evidence indicates that originally a complete *tuere* prow consisted of a separate transverse back-board, a carved base panel and a carved naturalistic face attached at the lower front, sometimes called a *parata*. None of these components have survived in association with the three *tuere* central panels listed above, although unconnected *parata* occur in several museum collections. Another very fragmentary *tuere* in the University Museum of Philadelphia (Simmons 1982:323) does consist of the transverse back-board and one piece of carved tracery from the central panel. A much later undated and unlocalised *tuere* prow complete with all of its components, in the British Museum (6967), is figured by Hamilton (1896:62).

However, the *tuere* prow (Fig. 5) drawn and measured by Cook, Banks and Spöring at Tolaga Bay in 1769 (Joppien and Smith 1985:177) has no transverse back-board, and the *parata* face at lower front is rendered as a complex stylised face which is clearly carved as a continuous projection from the hull of the canoe. Several other *tuere* drawn by Spöring and Parkinson clearly have only the central openwork carved panel without transverse back-board or *parata* face below. All of this suggests that *tuere* prows probably varied in construction much more than the surviving examples might indicate. One such variation in construction is seen in the unfinished variant *tuere* type of prow from Waipu (Fig. 6), now in Auckland Museum (AM 45527) (Simmons 1985:117). This has a trapezoid central panel, a large base board and low transverse back-board all carved out of one solid piece of wood. From another perspective, the Waipu prow can be considered as a variant of the distinctive north Taranaki type of one-piece prow exemplified by the Mokau and Waitara prows (Archev 1977:60,61).

For cultural reasons, these images have been removed.
Please contact Auckland Museum for more information.

Figs 4-9. *Tuere* prows. 4. Museo Nazionale di Antropologia e Etnologia di Firenze 32. Photo: R. Neich. 5. Tolaga Bay, 1769, drawn by Spöring. British Library Add.MS 23920, f77(b). 6. Waipu. Auckland Museum 45527. Photo: Auckland Museum. 7. Bream Bay, 1827. After D'Urville 1835: Plate 60, Fig. 9. 8. Rotorua. Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin VI 49741. Photo: Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin. 9. Prow of Taheretikiriki canoe from Kaipara and Waikato. Auckland Museum 167. Photo: Auckland Museum.

Judging from the predominance of *tuere* type prows in the drawings of Spöring and Parkinson, it might be surmised that *tuere* prows were more common than *pitau* prows on the *waka taua* of the late 18th century period. There are perhaps some indications that the canoes of the more important personages who came to meet the Europeans had *tuere* rather than *pitau* prows, suggesting a link between *tuere* prows and higher status.

Apart from the variant Waipu prow, none of the four early *tuere* in museum collections have their locality of origin recorded. Judging from their carving style, the British and the Florence Museum prows have been attributed to the Hokianga area (Neich 1996:100-1; Simmons 1985:67), the Berlin Museum prow has been attributed to Ngati Kahu of Doubtless Bay (Simmons 1985:111) and the Philadelphia prow has been attributed to the Gisborne area (Simmons 1982:323).

Among the other *tuere* prows drawn by Spöring and Parkinson during their visit, only one other locality was noted, that of a double canoe with *tuere* prow seen off Motuhora or Whale Island in the Bay of Plenty (Joppien and Smith 1985:178). No *tuere* were drawn on Cook's two later voyages.

However in February 1827, Dumont D'Urville's company on the *Astrolabe* (D'Urville 1835: Plate 60, Fig. 9) saw and recorded a very fine *tuere* prow (Fig. 7) on a canoe encountered in Bream Bay. The drawing shows a large *tuere* with broadly-spaced openwork spirals between all the *manaia* bodies. One of the lower *manaia* bodies has a large stylised face looking out to the side of the prow. The terminal *manaia* head at the upper front of the prow is completely obscured by a large bunch of feathers and two other vertical lines of feathers are spaced along the carving. There is clearly no *parata* head at the lower front. Measuring from the scale on the drawing, this prow is about five French feet long. The stern and relief carvings on the topstrake of this same canoe are illustrated.

This set of illustrations indicates that it is the largest canoe belonging to the Bay of Islands chief Rangui, whom D'Urville met at Bream Head. On 23 February, D'Urville (1950:148) described this canoe:

On our way, we met Rangui's three canoes coming to the ship. The largest, adorned at the prow and the stern with feathers and tufts of fur, displayed along its gunwale a series of carvings in bas relief, painted red, and often enhanced with inlaid mother of pearl; the whole thing carried out in the best style of New Zealand art.

Earlier, on 21 February, when D'Urville first encountered Rangui out at sea in his canoe, he wrote this graphic description:

We were scarcely anchored, when the whole sky clouded over, the wind blew very strongly from the S.E., bringing heavy rain and a strong swell. Nevertheless, after a few minutes we saw a long war canoe, which had come out from the head of the bay and was approaching us with all the vigour of the men who manned it, for they managed it with the greatest skill. It was really interesting to see this long frail craft alternately rise and disappear as it came through a rough sea. (D'Urville 1950:145)

In his account, D'Urville makes it clear that these large northern war canoes, some no doubt with *tuere* prows, were travelling almost annually between the Bay of Islands, the Hauraki Gulf and beyond into the Bay of Plenty, in the course of their raids on the southerners.

As these records indicate, the only early *tuere* with their locality of origin definitely known are the *tuere* seen by Cook at Tolaga Bay and at Motuhora, the *tuere* seen by D'Urville at Bream

Bay, the Waipu prow and the Opito *tuere*. Consequently, despite the common description of *tuere* prows as “northern”, only two are actually localised to Northland and one of these is the variant Waipu example. But despite these sparse records, the geographic range of *tuere* prows in the late 18th and early 19th centuries can be confirmed as virtually continuous from the Bay of Islands through the Hauraki Gulf, across the Bay of Plenty and down the East Coast.

Interestingly, the only two known *parata* with a reliable recorded locality also document the former existence of *tuere* prows in the Coromandel region. Both of these were purchased in 1915 by Auckland Museum (AM 5998, 5999) from Mrs John White, the wife of the notable recorder of Maori traditions. Both have a naturalistic face with detailed facial *moko* tattoo and are noted as coming from the Thames district. In White (1887:120), the head 5998 is described with an accompanying photograph as “Head of canoe built to fight the Ngapuhi in retaliation for those killed in the attack on Totara Pa on the Thames at Kauwaeranga”. This information dates it to some time soon after 1821, the date of the attack on Te Totara by Hongi Hika and his Ngapuhi warriors. The other Thames *parata* (5999) is said to be of older date.

The Opito, Berlin, Philadelphia, Florence and Waipu *tuere* were probably all carved with stone tools, indicating an 18th century or earlier date. The British Museum prow may have been done with stone tools but could perhaps be metal tool work from the early 19th century. Several later 19th century model *waka taua* now in museum collections are fitted with *tuere* prows (eg. Neich 1996:103). Another important later *tuere* (Fig. 8) complete with baseboard, transverse back-board and *parata* in Berlin Museum dates from 1868, and was definitely carved with metal tools (Neich 1997:192). This is probably to be identified as the canoe named Te Arawa, built and carved by Anaha Te Rahui of Ngati Tarawhai at Lake Okataina for his relatives, the brothers Te Waata and Te Pokiha Taranui.

The only full-size *tuere* in New Zealand museum collections are later 19th century carvings from the Kaipara and Waikato areas. A broken portion of the *tuere* prow of the Waikato canoe named Te Atairehia, now in Auckland Museum (AM 5637) is the oldest of these. Te Atairehia is said to have been owned and used at Ngaruawahia by the first Maori King Potatau te Wherowhero, who died in 1860. The oldest complete one is the prow of Taheretikitiki canoe (Fig. 9), which has been in Auckland Museum since 1896 (AM 167). This canoe was built and carved on the Kaipara Harbour in about 1882 by Ngati Whatua for their chief Paora Tuhaere of Orakei. Before his death in 1892, Tuhaere presented this canoe with its *tuere* prow to King Tawhiao of Waikato. From there, the original prow came to Auckland Museum in 1896 but the canoe Taheretikitiki, with a new prow, was used frequently in the late 1890s and early 1900s to ferry distinguished visitors across the Waikato River to Waahi Pa. Taheretikitiki was taken to the Christchurch International Exhibition in 1906 fitted with a *tuere* prow. The presence of these Northland Ngati Whatua style *tuere* at Waikato seems to have inspired Waikato carvers to produce several later *tuere* types of prows for canoes, commencing with Te Winika built at Turangawaewae during the 1930s under the stimulus of Te Puea Herangi, and others built subsequently (Nelson 1991:63).

Carvers in several areas have continued to produce the *tuere* form sporadically until the present, often consciously copying the older examples. One prominent case is the *tuere* prow carved by Thomas Heberley of Wellington in the 1930s for the canoe Te Heke Rangatira, copied very closely from Anaha te Rahui’s prow of Te Arawa canoe in the Berlin Museum (Neich 1991:135). Another is Nga Toki Matawhaorua, built at Waipapa Inlet, Kerikeri, for the 1940 Waitangi Centennial celebrations (Nelson 1991:70-71) with its *tuere* prow very closely modelled on the British Museum prow. More recent examples are Te Awanui built at Tauranga by Tuti Tukaokao in 1972 (Morris 1973) and several of the canoes built for the 1990 Treaty of Waitangi celebrations (Nelson 1991).

CONCLUSION

The discovery of this prow adds considerably to knowledge about the range of constructional variation and geographical distribution of *tuere* type prows. In historical and cultural terms, this prow is a major treasure of the Ngati Hei people of the Coromandel Peninsula. Very few Ngati Hei woodcarvings of any type have survived and this is the only large carving from Ngati Hei still in existence. Its loss to New Zealand, and to Ngati Hei in particular, is to be deplored.

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